

ANNIVERSARY OF LIBERATION WAR MUSEUM

Some personal retrospection

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THERE is a line in the commentary of the documentary show reel of the Liberation War Museum that says "it was the best of time, it was the worst of time". This line, taken from Charles Dickens' novel A Tale of Two Cities, very appropriately describes the predicament of the people of Bangladesh during the Great War for freedom we fought in 1971. Yet whenever I hear this line, a kind of depression takes me over because during those unforgettable days of '71 the only feeling that was my constant companion was that of achieving a mission. Therefore, there was no place for sorrow, none whatsoever for regret. We say that this war was thrust upon us and we took to the challenge gallantly. But, thinking in retrospect, whether then or later, I feel, that we had to embark upon this mission of separating from Pakistan. It was inevitable and only a matter of time. I think Bangladesh being Pakistan was a ludicrous proposition. Religion of the majority alone can never be the basis of nationhood. The founders of Pakistan had misled the largely poor agrarian people to believe that Pakistan would bring them, amongst other things, economic emancipation. This promise had led them to vote for the creation of this so-called "Promised Land" despite that it would mean giving birth to a country divided by over a thousand miles of foreign territory. They found, with a broken heart and soon enough, that not only did they not get what they thought they would, in the process, their language, their culture, their values and ideals would be smothered under the boots of the founders of the new country. They, at various times of history, protested politically and culturally, but the power that be turned deaf ears to all these dissensions. 1970 saw the last of these confrontations when Bengalis gave a clear signal through the weapon of ballots that



Visitors at Liberation War Museum



Freedom Fighters after a successful operation

they were a different nation altogether. Even this signal was ignored and the Pakistan army came down on the Bengalis. They, therefore, had no alternative but to pick up arms, whatever came their way, to give a befitting reply to the aggressors.

I, as an individual, grew up through this turbulent period of history. We had to do with our status as a colonised people in almost every sphere of our lives. Child hood turned to adolescence, adolescence to youth and we could take it no longer. Personally I was in no way

connected with any political party but I felt a strong urge to do something. Something that would rid our land of the neo-colonialists. Hence, for me, despite the fact that our brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers were brutalised it was the "best of time". No doubt that we were traversing a dark tunnel. But I knew and, in fact, literally saw celestial light at the end of that dreadful tunnel. In nine months we did arrive at the end of the tunnel. And lo and behold, the country that we dreamed about was born.

Finally, the protracted battle was over and we came back home. It is only then that we realised how gruesome life could be for the people who lived within this virtual prison for the nine long months. Hundreds of thousands were killed. Millions of women were dishonoured. Almost all our intellectuals were murdered in cold blood just the day before the day of our victory. Railway tracks were uprooted. Bridges were blown. Roads destroyed. Buildings were reduced to rubble. Still we were able to have our country that we wanted. People were in mourning at the loss of their near and dear ones. Every family had lost some one. But still one could see the glint of hope and joy in the eyes of the people. The mother clung on to her son who had just returned from the war and spoke fearlessly in her own language. The father threw her little daughter gleefully in the air and caught her back again in his arms. How vastly different was it than the kids being caught in the bayonet almost in a similar frolic.

We thought, as did many of our friends, that some day these stories of gruesomeness and of valour would be written. They would be spoken about in the form of narrative to form a rich repository of our oral history. More importantly, the objects related to the great struggle would find expression in display and speak for themselves in a museum. But it did not happen. As time passed, there hardly was any effort at preserving anything. Twenty-five years later eight like-minded people took upon themselves the near impossible task of founding a museum. We knew that with our meagre resources the task would be nearly impossible. That we may even face odds now that we had travelled the distance of twenty-five years and that a whole new generation born soon before or after the great struggle had little knowledge of how the war was fought and why was it fought. We knew that there was a systematic and relentless effort of thwarting and dampening the spirit, the values and the ideals of the war of liberation. There ensued a programme of deconstruction of the spirit of the liberation war and reconstruction of communalism, fundamentalism, intolerance and dictatorship in this most dear country of ours. We knew all these. Still we took a plunge. We thought that now was the best time to bring to the fore, especially to the new generation what was the reason why every individual of this country, in his/her own way fought so gallantly. Our museum would trace the history and heritage of our nation and then go through the tempestuous political history leading up to the War of Liberation. The cut off point would be 16th of December, our glorious Victory Day. We, through consensus amongst the founding members, did not go beyond our Victory

Day because that might have been a dangerous ground to tread on. Some people could consider us partisan. This would have defeated the cause of founding the museum. However, at our hub, the museum, we earnestly feel and believe that every achievement of every Bangladeshi, each laurel that we earn individually or collectively anywhere in the world, is something that we must uphold and propagate as a direct outcome of a liberated land. A nation bound by the shackles of colonialism cannot achieve such outstanding feats. Of course, this support we would only give to people or institutions working within the confines of non-communalism, pluralism, democracy and adhering to the tenets of basic human rights and freedom.

Today, as I stand before this museum that is closer to my heart than almost anything, I go back to the 22nd of March 1996. That was the day that our dream found an expression. I know that lack of resources did not permit us to put together a display which would do greater justice to the greatest achievement of our people but there was no lack of sincerity and dedication. It had rained that day and we had the dais erected on the lane in front of our museum. The inauguration was happening in the open air. Thousands of our fellow warriors, friends and freedom loving people of this city had assembled for the ceremony. The opening address was being read by our fellow trustee Dr. Sarwar Ali and people started crying. This was tears of joy, of success, of fulfilment. The rumbling cloud gave way to torrential rain. As the flag of the museum was being hoisted to the singing of the patriotic song "So many lives were sacrificed at the altar of freedom..." the tears of the crowd mingled with the rain and went down to bless the mother earth. Such feelings are rare and can only be held at the core of the heart. We live with this feeling today. We will live with it tomorrow and forever. When we are no more we would wish that this spirit is imbibed in the hearts of the generation after generation to

BOOK REVIEW

Revisiting Foreign Aid: A Review Bangladesh's Development 2003

Published: 2004 Publisher: Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and University Press Limited (UPL) Contributors: Salehuddin Ahmed, M Syeed Ahamed, M M Akash, Debapriya Bhattacharya, Uttam Kumar Deb, Mirza Azizul Islam, Fouzul Kabir Khan, A K Abdul Mubin, Masihur Rahman, Mustafizur Rahman, Ananya Raihan, Waseel Bin Shadat, M Syeduzzaman, and Rehman Sobhan

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THE importance of being well informed about the drivers of economic prosperity and agents of economic growth is something that anyone with some interest in developmental issues can hardly ignore. It is in this context that the CPD publication titled Revisiting Foreign Aid: A Review of Bangladesh's Development 2003 is an important addition to the relevant literature. This publication has been brought out under the CPD's flagship programme titled An Independent Review of Bangladesh's Development (IRBD) and is the eighth in the IRBD series. The IRBD2003 has two components. The first component (Part A) presents a review of the key developments in the Bangladesh economy during the fiscal year 2002-03 (FY03). This section comprises of three chapters: "State of the Bangladesh Economy in FY2003: A Macroeconomic Overview", "External Sector Performance in FY2003: Recovery and Beyond", and "The Poverty Reduction Strategy for Bangladesh: A Review of the Finalisation Process and Interim Measures". Each of these chapters scrutinises a number of critical economic trends from a policy perspective

which needs to be closely monitored in the near future. Some of the major issues that have been dealt with in the first chapter of the IRBD2003 include such important performance indicators as GDP growth rate, savings and investment performance, revenue mobilisation and public expenditure, and wages and inflation. The dynamics of export-import situation along with the major challenges emerging in the external sector has been extensively discussed in the second chapter. The third chapter delves on the implementation issues as regards the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). The discourse in Part A will provide the readership with a comprehensive understanding about the macroeconomic environment observed during FY03 and the early months of FY04.

The second component (Part B) of the IRBD2003, which the thematic part of the volume, puts under scrutiny the emerging dynamics and tensions as regards aid policy and practice in the context of Bangladesh. Various chapters in this section are "The Political Economy of Aid", "The Macroeconomic Dimensions of Aid Dependence", "Role of Foreign Aid in Public Investment in Bangladesh", "Utilisation of Aid", "Impact of Foreign Aid: A Study of

Selected Aided Projects", "Aid and Policy Reforms in Bangladesh", "Aid and Poverty", and "Aid and NGOs in Bangladesh". In preparation of this section, CPD's in-house professionals were joined by a number of authors who brought in a blend of sound conceptual understanding about aid related issues and practical exposure to policy and implementation related aspects of aid.

It has been argued in the thematic discussions that Bangladesh economy is evolving from a predominantly aid dependent to a trade dependent one. The declining contribution of aid to Bangladesh's development process with the broadening of the development partners' policy conditionalities is leading to growing tensions in the context of aid. The papers also argue that (a) aid flows have often been determined by political and strategic considerations of particular development partners rather than development needs and objectives of the recipient country, (b) market-oriented policy reforms, implemented at the behest of aid-providing institutions, do not necessarily guarantee a flow of accelerated aid, and (c) there is hardly any association between levels of aid flow and levels of poverty. However, the papers argue that aid continues to remain a

major determining factor in the performance of a number of sectors including private sector development, poverty alleviation etc. in Bangladesh.

A key feature of the IRBD2003 is the chronological compilation of the major economic events taking place during the first half of FY2003 (July 2002-December 2003). This segment of the volume will serve as a significant source of information for those who would like to track such important economic events.

There is no doubt that the IRBD2003 will provide the readership with important insights, and enable them to gain in-depth understanding, on the current state and future directions of the Bangladesh economy. Policymakers, academicians, students, development practitioners, media personnel, and others, with an interest in Bangladesh's current economic performance and future development strategies, will hopefully stand to benefit from the wealth of information and analyses to be found in IRBD2003.

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